



# Al-Risala 1989

December

## Monasticism

*The true believer is half-way to  
inhabiting the world to come.*

Monasticism as a system of religious worship has been variously interpreted both in its spirit and in its practice. At different periods in history certain sects have even taken monasticism to uncalled for extremes. The Quran, however, makes God's purpose quite clear in the following verse: "After them\* we sent other prophets, and after them Isa (Jesus), son of Mariam (Mary). We gave him the gospel and put compassion and mercy in the hearts of his followers. As for the monasticism which they invented themselves (seeking thereby to please God) – for we did not prescribe it for them – they did not observe it faithfully. We rewarded only those who were true believers, for many of them were evil-doers." (57:27)

According to this verse, monasticism implies renunciation of the world in the name of God; the teachings of Jesus Christ had been the same as those of the Prophet Mohammad. But, 200 years after Jesus Christ, his followers began to stray from the true path. One group gave themselves up to monasticism. They left the world for the jungles and the mountains. Renouncing all worldly things, they began to lead a life of self-inflicted persecution.

This renunciation of the world, for them meant going to extremes in matters of religion. They had been taught the virtues of abstinence in the purely psychological sense. But, for psychological abstinence, they mistakenly substituted physical abstinence. They had been commanded to participate in the world's activities without making worldly attainments their desired goals in life. But they misconstrued this avoidance of worldly goals to mean total uninvolvement in worldly affairs.

True believer spends his life among the people, but keeps his attention diverted towards God. He may engage in worldly activities, but his mind is actually functioning on a spiritual level. Living in this world, he is already inhabiting the world to come.

\*Noah, Abraham, etc.

3 December 1989

## The Master Key

*The Majesty that was Islam, a book by Montgomery Watt may be all praises for the greatness of Islam, but its title gives a misleading slant to the subject. It certainly evokes a Picture of Islam in all its glory, but, at the same time, it suggests that it was a thing of the past; that, in effect, it has come to a dead end. While arousing a feeling of pride in what Islam formerly was, it strikes a pessimistic note for the future.*

In the fifth chapter, the writer says that “astronomy was a practical science for Arabs, because they had to know the direction of Mecca from every Islamic city, in order to face in this direction in their prayers.” (p. 228) This shows that the rites of worship in Islam are not irrelevant rituals with no practical value: they are directly linked to the other human sciences. For instance, just as prayer requires a knowledge of direction, fasting requires the use of the calendar, *zakat* requires that arithmetic be used in its calculation, and Hajj requires a knowledge of geography.

If Islam in its true form is alive among Muslims, then all other matters of human value will also be alive amongst them. The establishment of Islam is synonymous with the establishment not only of ethics but also of science and culture. This was certainly true of the first phase of Islamic history. But in present times, Islam in its true form is not a living thing for the majority of the Muslims. That is why ethics, science and culture have become closed books to them. The master key to these realms is Islam. In both religion and worldly matter it is only Islam which can bring true enlightenment.

## Humanizing the Law

After generations of tragic experience under Czars and Commissars, the Soviet Union has decided to bar the police and other official bodies from conducting investigations on the basis of anonymous complaints.

The Communist Party daily *Pravda* reported Wednesday that the Presidium of Supreme Soviet has decreed a halt to the practice, effective immediately. In the future, according to the decree, a citizen's complaint must be signed and must include the signer's full name and address – home address and working address. Any complaint "lacking this data shall be deemed anonymous and not be subject for consideration," the decree says.

If this policy is adhered to strictly, Western observers said, it would be a major step forward in an area of human rights that effects millions of Soviet citizens. Countless innocent victims have been sent to prison or marched before a firing squad in the Soviet Union on the word of some faceless accuser. Yet the law has continued to require the police to investigate anonymous charges, and this has given unscrupulous and ambitious individuals a powerful weapon to use against their enemies or rivals.

The police, acting on the theory that where there is smoke there must be fire, often required the targets of such charges to prove their innocence rather than require the accusers to furnish proof of guilt.

It was this kind of thinking, more than likely, that gave rise to the cynical saying "Never drink with two other people. You won't know who the informer was."

In recent years it could affect a person's chances of travelling abroad and influence decisions concerning his work or his personal life.

According to a Muscovite who asked not to be identified by name, a policeman questioning a person who has been accused anonymously will customarily say he has received a "Signal" about him. "Now," he said, "I have a right to ask who sent that signal before I have to answer."

Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's advocacy of greater "democratisation" was no doubt responsible, at least in part, for Wednesday's decree.

*Krokodil*, the satirical magazine, said that there was a time when anonymous accusations were regarded as useful tools for preserving ideological purity. But the attitude toward anonymous informers has changed, the magazine said, and added, "one simply cannot be an ideological stalwart and a foul caricature of a man at the same time."

*Krokodil* said that its staff would no longer read unsigned letters. The latest issue of the magazine reported that 138 anonymous complaints had been ceremoniously burned to underscore its new policy.

Another sign of the new attitude was a satirical movie cartoon that is being shown this week in Moscow movie houses. It depicts a jealous worker making his boss's life miserable by writing false accusations in an anonymous letter. As police inspectors appear menacingly to check out the charges, the boss becomes increasingly upset, then suffers a heart attack and dies. At his funeral he is hailed as a good man. A wreath bears a poignant reminder of his torment: Charges not proven."\*

This right that Soviet citizens have managed to secure as late as 1988, 70 years after the socialist revolution, was granted to the people by Islam on the very first day that it established its system of law, 1400 years ago.

## The Teaching of Islam

In the 49th chapter of the Quran entitled 'Alhujurat' in which ethical teachings and social manners are described, verse No. 6 says: 'Believers, if an evil-doer brings you a piece of news, inquire first into its truth, lest you should wrong other unwittingly and repent of what you have done.'

Allama Abul Barkat Abdullah ibn Mahmood An Nasafi has placed the following interpretation upon this verse:

That is to say, that if an evil-doer brings a piece of news, then you must pause for a time before taking any action in order to investigate the true state of affairs. Do not just trust the words of the evil-doer.

This means that before taking any action against the accused person, the reliability of the complainant should be thoroughly investigated. Where the complainant does not even disclose his name, there could be grounds for treating his allegation as being based, not on facts, but on mere suspicion. And Islam forbids the investigation of mere suspicion. There is a *hadith* which specifically says: "Do not investigate suspicion."

According to Abdullah ibn Umar, the Prophet asked the people not to spy. That is why, when the job of collecting traditions was undertaken after the Prophet's demise, the traditionalists laid down a principle in the science of Hadith (known as *Jarah wa tадil*) by which every narrator had to have his credibility established, – even if it meant going into his whole life-history – before his statements would be given credence.

On this basis, a permanent principle was established in jurisprudence which 'laid the burden of proof on the plaintiff.' That is, it was his responsibility to provide proof of his claim rather than the accused person being required to establish his innocence.

\*(*Los Angeles Times*, Washington Post News Service)

If the statutory enforcement of this law for 70 years in the Soviet Union is seen as a form of deliberate cruelty, then the society of socialism has proved itself a red hell rather than a red paradise. And if we

place the construction upon it that there was no intentional cruelty, we shall have to admit that religious law is 1400 years ahead of man-made law. This being so, we can hardly hold religion to be a matter of ancient history which is only fit to be rejected in the light of modern developments; such an attitude would not now be supported by the established facts of recent history. Clearly it is man-made law and not divine law which needs to be examined and rejected in every instance that does not conform to humanitarian standards.

6 December 1989

## Four important pieces of advice.

Abu Dhar Gheffari recounts how, on six successive days, the Prophet informed him that he was about to be told something of the utmost importance. On the seventh day, the Prophet said: "I admonish you to fear God, both in your private and in your public life; when you sin, atone for it by doing good; do not ask anyone for anything; even if your whip has fallen to the ground, do not ask another to pick it up for you; and do not appropriate things, which have been entrusted to your safekeeping."

*(Al-Targhib wa al-Tarhib)*

## God's Commandment on Idolaters

### A Serious Misinterpretation

It is said in the Quran that pork is *najas*, unclean. It is also said in the Quran that idolaters are *najas*, again meaning unclean. Because the word *najas* is common to both dogmas, it has been construed to apply equally to the pig and the idolater. That is, it has been taken to mean that just as the pig is physically unclean, so also is the idolater. It has even been claimed that if a Muslim shakes hands with an idolater, he must immediately wash his hands and purify himself by performing his ablutions.<sup>1</sup>

This interpretation is not, however, correct. Although the word *najas* is common to both verses, it has to be applied with discretion according to the context. "The pig is unclean" means quite simply that the pig is bodily unclean. But, "The idolater is unclean" means that the *beliefs* of the idolater are unacceptable. So far as the lack of cleanliness of an idolater's body is concerned, the opinion of the majority is that neither the body nor the being of the idolater is unclean. That is why it is permissible to eat the food prepared by the people of the book.<sup>2</sup>

Abdur Rahman Aljazairi writes, "The words of the Quran that the idolaters are unclean means that they are unclean in spirit, as interpreted by Shari'. "It does not follow that the body of the idolater is unclean in the way that the body of the pig is.<sup>3</sup>

The Truth is that if Muslims make an issue of such matters, it is because of their lack of missionary zeal. When other communities are considered *mad'u* it is quite acceptable to form close ties with them. But when they are not considered *mad'u* they become objects to be avoided.

### Notes:

1. Ibn Kathir, *Tafseer*, vol. II, p. 346.
2. *Ibid*, vol. II, p. 346.
3. *Al-Figh Atal Mazahib Al-Arab'a*, part I, p. 6.

7 December 1989

**Never delay the payment of wages.**

Abdullah ibn Umar records the Prophet as saying, "Pay a labourer his wages before his sweat has dried."

## Banish Pride

It was Friday, May 5, 1989. I went into a large mosque in Delhi to say my Friday prayers. There, before the sermon, the Imam (the leader of the prayers) made a fiery speech which lasted about twenty minutes. His main point was that "we must be proud, for we are believers in one God."

This statement is but an echo of present-day Muslim sentiments. The Muslims of today, especially their leaders, are no different in their psychology from this Imam who worked himself up to such heights of eloquence on the subject of Islam as a "thing of pride." But surely this is a deviation from true Islamic thinking—a deviation, moreover, which is the real root of all Muslim shortcomings. Muslims do not realize it, but this is what has deprived them of God's blessings in modern times. This is why, when large-scale movements are launched by Muslims, they do not achieve anything positive, but contribute rather to their own downfall.

Let us take the example of a group of people walking along a path which they believe to be perfectly safe. They walk along, unmindful of unforeseen perils. Then, all of a sudden, one of them catches a glimpse of a lion standing by the wayside. It is as real and alive as the bushes which surround it. At that moment what words will spring to the observer's lips? Will he say, for example, "We must feel proud of standing before a real, live lion....."?

Surely not. At the sight of a lion, one is not so much proud as awestruck. Naturally, anything which is awesome will awaken feelings, not of pride, but of humility. The same is true of God – the Creator of the lion – although on a much grander scale. God is a Being – the mightiest, the most powerful – who stands above all else. The conviction that such a Being exists will produce a sense of humility and modesty rather than a feeling of pride.

The Quran is man's introduction to God, for the whole Quran is full of God's Being. Here are a few verses which illustrate this:

Allah: there is no god but Him, the Living, the Eternal One. Neither slumber nor sleep overtakes Him. He is what the heavens and the earth contain. Who can intercede with Him except by His permission? He knows all about the affairs of men at the present and in the future. They can grasp only that part of His knowledge which He wills. His throne is as vast as the heavens and the earth, and the preservation of both does not weary Him. He is the Exalted, the Immense One (2: 255).

Have fear of Allah and end your disputes. Obey Allah and His Apostle, if you are true believers. The true believers are those whose hearts are filled with awe at the mention of

Allah, and whose faith grows stronger as they listen to His revelations. They are those who put their trust in their Lord (8: 1-2).

Throughout the entire Quran, there are many such verse, introducing God, which leave their readers trembling; the whole being of man is shaken by God's grandeur. At many places the Quran tells us that those who believe in God have their hearts filled with awe whenever they remember their Creator. The hair on their bodies stands on end at the very mention of His name. On the other hand, it is noteworthy that there is no verse in the Quran which says that believers must be proud of God.

The truth is that many of those who profess belief in God are actually strangers to belief in the real sense of the word. Were they true believers, the very thought of God would make them feel humble and modest. When speaking of God they would display no pride or arrogance, but go in fear and trembling.

9 December 1989

## Making the Quran one' greatest preoccupation

Whenever officials were to be despatched on missions, Umar would make them promise not to ride on Turkish horses, eat fine flour or wear silken clothes, and not to close their doors to the needy. He warned them that if they fell into any of these errors, they would be punished. Then, having extracted this promise from them, he would send them off. If Umar had to relieve some official of his duties, he would say to him:

"I did not appoint you to lord over the Muslims so that you could indulge in carnage and despoil them of their honour and their property. I appointed you to establish prayer, to distribute the spoils of war and to make just decisions concerning them."

(Al-Bayhaqi)

10 December 1989

## The Cause Lies Within

By the end of the seventeenth century Islam had reached the peak of its ascendancy. The great symbols of Muslim power in the world were the four huge empires – the Mughal, the Safavid, the Alawi (Filati) and the Ottoman, the last mentioned spreading from Baghdad to Algiers and from Aden to Hungary. But, from the beginning of the eighteenth century, a decline set in the governing of these empires. Although revivalist movements were launched during this period, they could neither prevent this decline nor lead Muslims once again to their former position of dominance. It was a very different situation from that of the great empire of Baghdad which, although devastated by the Tartars in the thirteenth century, had regained its pre-eminence in the space of a single century. From the seventeenth century to the present day, the struggle to revive Islam has been going on, led by innumerable secular and religious bodies, but all that this activity has accomplished is to add to Islam's history of failure.

The truth is that all past incidents of aggression have been engineered by non-Muslims. The problem could, therefore, be solved by successfully combating external enemies. But the decline of present times has been the result not of external activity, but of Muslims' own intellectual and spiritual backsliding. The actual need of the hour is to bring about a spiritual and intellectual revolution *from within the Muslim fold*. But our Muslim leaders cannot see this, and continue not only to blame non-Muslim nations for their fall, but also to engage in futile counter-attacks. This is just like firing arrows at non-existent targets, or like planting seeds in such stony ground, that no tree is ever going to come up. This is why, in spite of countless sacrifices, the dream of Muslim revival is never going to be fulfilled.

10 December 1989

### Pardoning a servant.

A desert Arab once came before the Prophet and asked how many times a day he should pardon his, servant. "Seventy times," replied the Prophet.

(Al-Trimidhi, Abu Daud)

## Falling Between Two Stools Science Versus Superstition

*The Times of India* of January 12, 1989, carries a picture on page one (reproduced below) showing a lean old man sitting on a platform, with one leg dangling so that his foot touches the head of a man standing below with feet bare and hands folded. The latter is none other than Mr. N.D. Tiwari, the former Chief Minister of U.P. The old man on the platform is a Hindu saint, Deoraha Baba of Vrindaban (a town in Uttar Pradesh). He does not actually live in the town but stays far away from human habitation on top of his platform. Those who can receive such a blessing from him are considered very fortunate.



Such a practice is symbolic of conditions in India today, where leaders, still professing the same dedication to scientific progress as they did at the time of independence, regularly indulge in age-old superstitious rituals just as if they, and India, did not form a part of the modern world. Are they not aware that they are allowing themselves to be dragged down by superstition from the high intellectual plane on which they – as national leaders – ought to be functioning? How can science go hand in hand with superstition? Yet our leaders appear to be trying to pursue both goals simultaneously. In so doing,

they are guilty of leading their lives by double standards. Iqbal Ahmad Suhail sums up the situation in his couplet:

"While the steps go forward, the eyes look back. The goal is known, but whither go they? The direction itself is ill-defined. What say you to the time's vicissitudes?"

India will soon have been free for half a century, yet, in spite of so many years having passed since the country gained its freedom, and in spite of the vastness and diversity of India's resources, it has yet to take its place among the developed countries of the world. The most obvious reason is that its leaders are like the hunters who try to chase two rabbits at once: they lose both in the general confusion.

12 December 1989

### **Not indulging in vain talk, or wishing anyone ill.**

When people came to visit Abu Dujanah as he lay on his death bed, and saw that despite his sickness, his face was shining, they asked him how it was that his face was so radiant. Abu Dujanah replied: "I place reliance on two things more than on any others. For one, I did not indulge in vain talk; for another my heart was free from ill-feeling towards Muslims."

## The Message of the Quran

They ask you about drinking and gambling. Say: 'There is great sin in both, although they have some benefit for men: but their sin is greater than their benefit.' They ask you what they should spend. Say: 'What you can spare.' Thus God makes plain for you His revelations, so that you may reflect upon this world and the Hereafter. They question you concerning orphans. Say: 'To deal justly with them is best. If you mix their affairs with yours, they are you brothers. God knows the man who means mischief from the man who means good. If God pleased, He could afflict you. He is Mighty and Wise (2: 219-20).

The answer to the above questions reveal certain fundamental principles: firstly, if something does more harm than good, it should be eschewed: secondly, any wealth in excess of one's actual needs should be spent in the cause of God: thirdly, in one's dealings with others, one should avoid any action which could lead to evil, and engage only in such activity as will bring some positive benefit to society.

Let us concede that after drinking wine a person becomes elated. And gambling could be looked upon as an easy way of making money without having to work hard for it. But, viewed from a purely moral angle, drinking and gambling lead to such spiritual danger as far outweighs any benefits they may confer. The same rule applies to other human activities. If they are calculated to be more harmful than beneficial, they are to be avoided. Social celebrations, political activities, personal affairs – everything, in fact, that one does in life, should be evaluated in terms of this standard, before one ever considers engaging in them.

Who can truly call himself a Muslim? He who makes the next world his goal and who is constantly striving to find favour with his Lord. Such a man does not make worldly possessions his aim in life. This does not mean, however, that he renounces the world, for a certain number of material things are an obvious necessity. It simply means that when he makes a living and engages in worldly activities, he does so only insofar as such action is related to acquiring the bare necessities of life. His purpose in life is never to amass wealth. His purpose, on the contrary, is to find favour with the Lord. So, out of whatever he has, he keeps only what he really needs for himself and spends the rest in the cause of God.

If we were to attempt to state, in explicit, legal terms, how men should deal with their fellows and how they should conduct their business, this would be too complicated in the context of daily living. It is, therefore, more useful to lay down some simple, fundamental guidelines: to wish others well and to keep in mind not just our own interests, but also the interests of those with whom we have to deal, thinking of them as brothers.

God will never take us to task if we act in a manner which is conducive to harmony and justice.

You shall not wed idolatresses, unless they embrace the faith. A believing slave-girl is better than an idolatress, although she may please you. Nor shall you wed to idolaters unless they embrace the faith. A believing slave is better than an idolater, although he may please you. These call to the Fire; but God calls you, by His will, to Paradise and to forgiveness. He makes plain His revelations to mankind, so that they may be mindful. They ask you about menstruation. Say: 'It is an indisposition. Keep aloof from women during their menstrual periods and do not approach them until they are clean again. But when they have purified themselves, have intercourse with them in the manner enjoined upon you by God. God loves those who turn to Him in repentance, and He loves those who keep themselves clean.' Women are your tilth: go, then, unto your tilth as you please. Do good works and fear God. Bear in mind that you shall meet Him. Give good news to the believers (2: 221-23).

To illustrate the purpose of the matrimonial bond, the relationship between man and wife may be likened to that of a farmer and his field. This means that it is not just for selfish enjoyment that a couple takes the marriage vow. Just as a farmer goes about the task of planting his fields in a serious manner, so also is the husband/wife relationship a serious one. Various factors have to be taken into account, certain guidelines followed.

The first thing to be taken into consideration when choosing a spouse is belief. The relationship between a husband and wife is an extremely delicate one, balanced precariously within a network of social, domestic and psychological factors. For such a close, intricate relationship to flourish there has to be harmony of belief. A Muslim who marries someone of another faith may have to compromise on his beliefs, in which case it will be his faith that suffers; and if he refuses to do so, it will be his marriage which will founder. Secondly, a husband and his wife should consort and cohabit according to the pattern of creation. Just as revelation is an expression of God's will, so is nature, for it acts exactly according to divine command. Natural laws are for us to follow, just as revealed laws are to be obeyed. And one should fear God at all times, always remembering that He knows a person's inner and outer states and that eventually one is going to be brought before Him.

Doing good works means acting with the Hereafter in mind. Seeing that there is an eternal side to life, which is more important than the temporal side, it is for eternity that we should strive. Should our actions on earth profit us in this life, but be harmful to our everlasting life, we shall have lived our lives in vain. What we do on earth will be judged after death. We should take care to ensure that our deeds measure up well on God's scale of justice, for if they fail to do so there is no way we can avoid His punishment.

15 December 1989

## A good leader must ensure that his orders are effectively carried out.

"Suppose I appoint someone who appear to be a good leader and command him to make justice his ideal," said Umar, "tell me—will I have discharged my responsibilities?" Those assembled replied that he would have done all that could be expected of him. "Not so," replied Umar."I should also have to see to it that he does as I command."

(Al-Bayhaqi, Ibn Asakir)

Whenever Umar appointed a new governor, he would make enquiries about him from envoys from the land he ruled over. Was he a ruler who cared about his subjects, did he visit slaves and walk in funeral processions? Was he accessible to his people and sympathetic towards those who came to his door? If the answers were that he heard cases sympathetically and looked after slaves well, Umar would permit his rule to continue, but otherwise he would promptly appoint another governor to relieve him of his post.

(*Kanz al-Ummal*)

## Madras High Court Dismisses a Writ Petition Against Azan

*Reproduced below is the text of the Madras High Court Judgement delivered on 12<sup>th</sup> July, 1989, by Justice Bakthavatsalam, dismissing a writ petition filed against Azan.*

"The prayer in the writ petition is for the issuance of a Writ of mandamus directing the third respondent to take suitable steps to prevent use of the public addressing system, coming from the mosque, situated at No. 60, Village Road, Nungambakkam, Madras. The first petitioner is the Hereditary Trustee of Arulmigu Agatheeswarar Prasanna Venkatesa Perumal Devasthanam. She alleges in the affidavit that there are eight temples situated within a radius of 100 to 200 meters. It seems that one of the properties of the temple which was the subject matter of certain civil proceedings was purchased by one V.G. Ramalingam and he, in turn, sold it to the Nungambakkam Muslim Welfare Association.

"It seems that a mosque has been constructed on the said property and prayers are being offered in the mosque by means of a public addressing system. The grievances of the petitioner is that this has created a nuisance for all the public living in and around the temples, mentioned above. When Poojas are conducted in the temples, the mosque indulges in the public addressing system thereby creating chaos and confusion. It seems that the petitioner and others moved the authorities concerned complaining about the public and addressing system indulged in by the mosque and stating that the temple and their worshippers should not, in any manner, be prejudiced by the action of the mosque and offering prayers in the mosque by public addressing system, is a nuisance caused to the local inhabitants. When no action was taken by the third respondent, the petitioners have filed this writ petition with the above prayer.

"I heard Mr. A.S. Kailasam, learned counsel for the petitioners, in extense. I am not satisfied that this is a matter in which this Court should interfere by extending its area under Article 226 of the Constitution. The reason given by the petitioners in the affidavit that the public addressing system in the mosque causes nuisance to the public is not convincing. If the petitioners feel that such public addressing system causes nuisance, there are other remedies open to them and surely no relief could be, given under Article 226 of the Constitution in that regard. Moreover, in a democratic country like ours where different religions are professed, every person has got a right to worship according to his own religion.

"Actually it is so enshrined in Article 25 of the Constitution. Moreover, the first petitioner who is a hereditary trustee of a Hindu temple and who has filed this writ petition representing the inhabitants of the locality cannot deny that in Hindu temples also, the very same public addressing system is used during festivals and especially during the month of Margazhi now-a-days when Thiruppavai and Thiruvenbavai are recited in the very early hours of the day i.e. even before the sunrise. As such, in matters of this kind, certain amount of tolerance is needed especially in a country like ours where different religious beliefs are practiced.

"Therefore, this Court has got a duty to strike a balance in such matters. As such I do not think the petitioners' complaint is worthwhile considering and I am sure that the public addressing system is used in the mosque only according to law. What is required on the part of the authorities is to see that everybody uses the public addressing system only according to law. With this observations, the writ petition will stand dismissed."

Courtesy: *Radiance*, September 3-9, 1989.

17 December 1989

### **Being humanitarian.**

According to Abu Hurayrah, a desert Arab came and urinated in the Prophet's mosque. People then came running to beat him. The Prophet, restraining them from doing so, said: "Pour a vessel of water over the place where he has urinated. You have been sent to make things easy for people, not to make things difficult."

(Al-Bukhari)

## Ayodhya – The Political Appropriation and Abuse of History

Behind the present Babri Masjid-Ram Janambhoomi controversy lie issues of faith, power and politics. Each individual has a right to his or her belief and faith. But, when beliefs claim the legitimacy of history, then the historian has to attempt a demarcation between the limits of belief and historical evidence. When communal forces make claims to historical evidence for the purposes of communal politics, then the historian has to intervene.

Historical evidence is presented here not as a polemic or as a solution to the Ram Janambhoomi Babri Masjid conflict, for this conflict is not a matter of historical records alone. The conflict emerges from the widespread communalisation of Indian politics. Nevertheless, it is necessary to review the historical evidence to the extent it is brought into play in the communalisation of society.

Is Ayodhya the birth place of Ram? This question raises a related one: Is the present day Ayodhya the Ayodhya of the Ramayan?

The events of the story of Ram, originally told in the Ram-Katha were rewritten in the form of a long epic poem, the *Ramayana*, by Valmiki. Since this is a poem and much of it could have been fictional, including characters and places, historians cannot accept the personalities, the events or the locations as historically authentic, unless there is other supporting evidence. Very often historical evidence contradicts popular beliefs.

According to *Valmiki Ramayana*, Ram the king of Ayodhya, was born in the *treta yug* that is supposed to be in 3102 B.C. There is no archaeological evidence to show that at this early time, the present day Ayodhya was inhabited. The earliest possible date for settlements at the site are of about the eighth century B.C. The archaeological remains indicate a fairly simple material life, more primitive than what is described in the *Valmiki Ramayan*.

There is also a controversy over the location of Ayodhya. Early Buddhist texts refer to Shravasti and Saket, not Ayodhya, as the major cities of Kosha. Jain texts also refer to Saket as the capital of Kosha.

The town of Saket was renamed Ayodhya by a Gupta king. Skanda Gupta in the late fifth century A.D. moved his residence to Saket and called it Ayodhya.

In a way, the local tradition of Ayodhya recognizes the ambiguous history of its origin. The story is that Ayodhya was lost after the *treta yug* and was rediscovered by Vikramaditya. While searching for the lost Ayodhya, he met a yogi who told him that he should let a cow and a calf roam. When the calf came across the Janambhoomi milk would flow from its udders. The king followed the yogi's advice. When at a certain point the calf's udders began to flow the king decided that this was the site of the ancient Ayodhya.

This myth of “re-discovery” of Ayodhya, this claim to an ancient sacred lineage, is an effort to impart to a city, a specific religious sanctity which it lacked. But even in the myths, the process of identification of the sites appear uncertain and arbitrary.

If present day Ayodhya was known as Saket before the fifth century, then the Ayodhya of Valmiki’s *Ramayan* was fictional. If so, the identification of Ram Janambhoomi in Ayodhya today becomes a matter of faith, not of historical evidence.

Ayodhya has been a sacred centre of many religions, not of the Ram cult alone. Its rise as a major centre of Ram worship is, in fact, relatively recent.

Inscriptions from the fifth to the eighth centuries A.D. and even later refer to people from Ayodhya but none of them refer to its being a place associated with the worship of Ram.

Hsuan Tsang writes of Ayodhya as a major centre of Buddhism with many monasteries and stupas and few non-Buddhists. For Buddhists Ayodhya is a sacred place where Buddha is believed to have stayed for some time.

Ayodhya has been an important centre of Jain pilgrimage. To the Jains it is the birth place of the first and fourth Jain Tirthankaras.

The cult of Ram seems to have become popular from the 13th century. It gains ground with the gradual rise of the Ramanandi sect and composition of the Ram story in Hindi.

Even in the 15th and 16th centuries Ramanandis had not settled in Ayodhya on a significant scale. Shaivism was more important than the cult of Ram. Only from the 18th century do we find the Ramanandi sadhus settling here on a large scale. It was in the subsequent centuries that they built most of their temples in Ayodhya.

So far no historical evidence has been unearthed to support the claim that the Babri mosque has been constructed on the land that had been earlier occupied by a temple.

Except for the verses in Persian inscribed on the two sides of the mosque door there is no other primary evidence to suggest that a mosque had been erected there on Babur’s behalf. Mrs. Beveridge, who was the first to translate *Babar Nama*, gives the text and the translation of these above verses in an appendix to the memoirs. The crucial passage reads as follows: “By the command of the Emperor Babur, whose justice is an edifice reaching up to the very height of the heaven, the good hearted Mir Baqi built the alighting place of angels. *Bavad khair baqi* (may this god last for ever)”.

The inscription only claims that one Mir Baqi, a noble of Babur, had erected the mosque. Nowhere does either of the inscriptions mention that the mosque had been erected on the site of a temple. Nor is there any reference in Babur’s memoirs to the destruction of any temple in Ayodhya.

The *Ain-i-Akbari* refers to Ayodhya as “the residence of Ramachandra who in the *treta yug* combined in his own person both the spiritual supremacy and kingly office”. But nowhere is there any mention of the erection of the mosque by the grandfather of the author’s patron on the site of the temple of Ram.

It is interesting that Tulsidas, the great devotee of Ram, a contemporary of Akbar and an inhabitant of the region, is upset at the rise of the *mlechha* but makes no mention of the demolition of a temple at the site of Ram Janambhoomi.

It is in the 19th century that the story circulates and enters official records. These records were then cited by others as valid historical evidence on the issue.

This story of the destruction of the temple is narrated, without any investigation into its historical veracity, in British records of the region.

Mrs.Beveridge in a footnote to the translated passage quoted, above affirms her faith in the story. She suggests that Babar being a Muslim, and “impressed by the dignity and sanctity of the ancient Hindu shrine” would have displaced “at least in part” the temple to erect the mosque. Her logic is simple: “....like the obedient follower of Muhammad he was in intolerance of another Faith, (thus he) would regard the substitution of a temple by a mosque as dutiful and worthy”.

This is a very questionable inference deduced from a generalised presumption about the nature and inevitable behaviour of a person professing a particular faith. Mrs. Beveridge produced no historical evidence to support her assertion that the mosque was built at the site of a temple. Indeed the general tenor of Babur’s state policy towards places of worship of other religions hardly justifies Mrs. Beveridge’s inference.

To British officials who saw India as a land of mutually hostile religious communities, such stories may appear self-validating. Historians, however, have to carefully consider the authenticity of each historical statement and the records on which they are based.

While there is no evidence about the Babri mosque having been built on the site of a temple, the mosque according to the medieval sources, was not of much religious and cultural significance for the Muslims.

The assumption that Muslim rulers were invariably and naturally opposed to the sacred places of Hindus is not always borne out by historical evidence.

The patronage of the Muslim nawabs was crucial for the expansion of Ayodhya as a Hindu pilgrimage centre. Gifts to temples and patronage of Hindu sacred centres was an integral part of the nawabi mode of exercise of power. The diwan of Nawab Safdarjung built and repaired several temples in Ayodhya. Safdarjung gave land to the Nirvana akhara to built a temple on Hanuman hill in Ayodhya. Asaf-ud-daulah’s diwan contributed to the building of the temple fortress in Hanuman hill.

In moments of conflict between Hindus and Muslims, the Muslim rulers did not invariably support Muslims. When a dispute between the Sunni Muslims and the Naga Sadhus over a Hanumangarhi temple in Ayodhya broke out in 1855. Wajid Ali shah took firm and decisive action. He appointed a tripartite investigative committee consisting of the district official Agha Ali Khan, the leading Hindu landholder, Raja Mansingh, and the British officers in charge of the company's forces. When the negotiated settlement failed to control the build up of communal forces, Wajid ali Shah mobilised the support of Muslim leaders to bring the situation under control, confiscated the property of Maulavi Amir Ali, the leader of the Muslim communal forces, and finally called upon the army to crush the Sunni muslim group led by Amir Ali. An estimated three to four hundred Muslims were killed.

This is not to suggest that there were no conflicts between Hindus and Muslims, but in neither case were they homogeneous communities. There was hostility between factions and groups within a community, as there was amity across communities.

This review of historical evidence suggests that the claims made by Hindu and Muslim communal groups can find no sanction from history. As a sacred centre the character of Ayodhya has been changing over the centuries. It has been linked to the history of many religions. Different communities have vested it with their own sacred meaning. The city cannot be claimed by anyone community as its exclusive sacred preserve.

The appropriation of history is a continual process in any society. But in a multi-religious society like ours, appropriations which draw exclusively on communal identities engender endless communal conflict. And attempts to undo the past can only have dangerous consequences.

It is appropriate, therefore, that a political solution is urgently found – the Ram Janambhoomi Babri Masjid area be demarcated and declared a national monument.

*Extracts from a document prepared by members of the Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University.*

(Courtesy: *The Times of India*, November 6, 1989)

22 December 1989

## The fine sensitivity taught by Islam

Abdullah ibn Abbas relates how a man laid a goat on its side preparatory to slaughtering it, then started sharpening his knife. Noticing this, the Prophet asked, "Are you bent on prolonging its agony? You should have sharpened your knife first, before you laid it down on its side."

(Al- Tabarani, Ahmad)